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The tough decisions ahead

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WASHINGTON - President Ronald Reagan faces some very tough decisions in the aftermath of the massacre of US Marines in a Beirut bomb blast yesterday.

NEWS ANALYSIS

He must decide, possibly on the basis of inconclusive evidence, who was behind the attack and with what motivation, and then choose a course of diplomatic and perhaps military action.

The presumption of some senior Administration officials, as the evidence was still being sifted, is that even if

Iranian soldiers carried out the attacks on the US and French military compounds, Syria was behind the assaults.

These officials suggested that the objective was to build political pressures in the United States, France, Italy and Britain to withdraw the multinational force from Lebanon.

With the Western presence removed, Syria could enjoy an almost free hand both to influence the redistribution of political power in Lebanon and to control most of the country militarily, possibly even moving into Beirut itself.

It is not Iran that would assume power in Lebanon if the Western presence were withdrawn. What the President, therefore, must have had in mind yesterday when he castigated "those who would assume power if they could have their way" was Syria and its principal backer, the Soviet Union.

If that emerges as the United States conclusion, the following policy options are possible:

- An effort to get the Arab League to revoke the mandate under which Syria has about 50,000 "peacekeeping" troops in Lebanon. The government of Lebanese President Amin Gemayel has

already demanded that Syrian, Israeli and Palestine Liberation Organization forces all withdraw - to no avail.

- A campaign to isolate Syria, diplomatically and economically. This could include an attempt to get censure in the United Nations, if hard evidence of Syrian complicity

can be developed, appeals to Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf oil producers to curtail their financial assistance to Damascus and possibly an effort to mount an international economic boycott.

- Military retaliation against such targets as Syrian military depots in Lebanon which supply arms and munitions to Lebanese allies or Syrian installations that have given them artillery support. The aim would be to convince Syrian President Hafez Assad that an escalation of violence could endanger his troops and his position in Lebanon.

- A warning to the Soviet Union that even though it is not directly blamed for the bombings, by encouraging Assad with advanced weapons and thousands of advisers it risks becoming involved in a military confrontation with the United States if the situation gets out of hand.

The multinational force was deployed to Beirut a year ago to demonstrate to Lebanese factions that the West supported the strengthening of the central government and armed forces of Gemayel, and to discourage Syria from moving its army into a power vacuum in Beirut. The force originally included US, French and Italian troops. A 100-man British force was added later.

US backed negotiations

The Reagan Administration at that point decided first to try to negotiate the withdrawal of all foreign forces and then to seek a broadening of the power base of the Lebanese government, so it would more fairly represent all Lebanese factions.

Last April and May, Secretary of State George Shultz conducted a diplomatic mission to the area, resulting in a normalization agreement between Lebanon and Israel under which the latter agreed to pull out its troops if Syria and the PLO could be persuaded to do likewise.

The US presumption was that Assad would go along, however reluctantly, to remove the threat represented by Israeli troops in Lebanon within artillery range of Damascus and to avoid the possibility of a major clash with Israel.

But Assad, apparently confident that war weariness in Israel together with the presence of long-range Soviet-manned air defense missiles in Syria would deter the Israelis from military action, told Shultz he would not withdraw and would not accept implementation of the Israeli-Lebanese agreement. Syria said that the agreement had been imposed on Lebanon and that

Israel should not be allowed to gain from its invasion.

Because there was no early prospect of a Syrian pullout and wanting to diminish the cost in lives and dollars of its military presence, Israel later decided it would pull back to more defensible lines south of the Awali River.

That created a power vacuum in the Shouf Mountains, overlooking Beirut.

Syria not only encouraged the Druze by supplying tanks, artillery and ammunition but also allowed PLO units to pass through into the Shouf to support the Druze in their fight against first Christian Phalange units and then the Lebanese army.

At that point, the US, French and British decided to move additional naval and air units close to the scene to keep the Druze and its allies from linking up with Amal Shiite militia units in Beirut because this could have brought about the collapse of the Gemayel government.

Air strikes and naval gunfire in support of the Lebanese army were also meant to convince Assad he was risking an escalation of the fighting against his positions in the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon.

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Israeli warning

At the same time, Israel sent a warning to Druze leaders and the Syrians that unless PLO units were removed from the Shouf, Israel stood ready to bomb them out.

US analysts believed a few weeks ago that Assad decided to go along with a cease-fire and planned reconciliation talks among the Lebanese factions because his military option was becoming too hazardous and he could still achieve many of his political objectives in Lebanon through the talks, in which Syria would have a direct role.

Then came a new phase of struggle as snipers started picking off US Marines at the Beirut airport. This was the sort of threat against which air power and naval gunfire were impotent.

US intelligence concluded that three groups were involved in the sniping: Iranian soldiers, radical Shiite militiamen and splinter PLO factions. All three have been supplied by Syria and their units allowed to pass through Syrian lines to positions near the airport. Thus it was presumed the effort was at the least supported and perhaps even directed by Syria.

In recent days, Syrian statements and news reports have warned that it might fire the recently supplied Soviet SS21 rockets at US ships and planes off the Lebanese coast and that the United States was risking a confrontation with the Soviet Union. US analysts, however, think Moscow has been very cautious about what support Damascus could expect if it gets embroiled in an escalating conflict in Lebanon.

"The Russians want to keep the pot boiling," one American official declared, "but not boiling over."